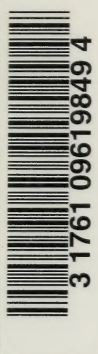


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An Address on

THE DEPENDENT CHILD

DELIVERED BY

DR. GERTRUDE E. HALL,

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AT

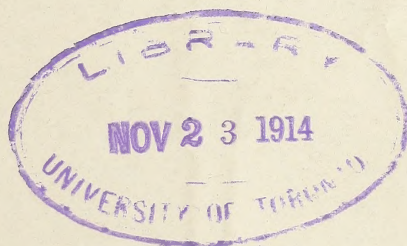
**The First National Conference on Race
Betterment**

AT THE

Battle Creek Sanitarium

BATTLE CREEK, MICH.

January 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12, 1914



THE DEPENDENT CHILD

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New York.

All children are naturally dependent upon their parents and guardians, for it is characteristic of the human species that its young are born more helpless and remain dependent longer than the young of any other species. When, however, parents die or try to dispossess themselves of their children, and to make others responsible for their physical and moral welfare, the children, if accepted as public or private charges, become thereby what is technically known as "dependent children." The several states treat dependent children in various ways. Some place them in institutions, others send them to foster homes and asylums, while still others have a system of home relief or so-called "pensions for dependent mothers." Each system is criticized by thoughtful observers, for it is said that the indoor method of relief "institutionalizes the children;" that in the placing out to work "undesirable children are sometimes transferred in large numbers to communities where they later become social burdens;" and that the "pension" system, unless wisely applied, "leads to corruption and the pauperization of families."

The recognized defects of child-caring work warrant us in analyzing its results. Both as individuals and as a nation we should give serious study to this problem, for it is one of the largest that confronts public and private charity today; it involves the investment of millions of dollars annually, and decides the destinies of thousands of the states' future citizens. Charities for children are always popular, for no philanthropic theme appeals so strongly to the hearts and pocketbooks of right-minded persons as the promotion of the happiness and welfare of little children. But the impulse to give liberally in response to appeals should not be followed without first weighing the good and the harm that may result therefrom. The efficacy of methods of relief should not be measured in terms of so much food and clothing, but broadly in those of child, race and social welfare. The problem is therefore to know what conditions make it necessary for children to be supported outside their homes, what kind of children are becoming dependent, what effect their previous life had upon them, and also the influence of the institutional or other new environment provided. We should know whether our children, like Romulus and Remus, the first dependent Roman children, grow up to be kings

and rulers, if not of others, at least of their own hearts, or whether they tend to swell the ranks of unskilled labor, or even of vagrancy and vice.

A special study along this line is in progress in New York State and while it is far from completed, some of the indications are significant. First, as to the causes of dependency, not more than half are legitimate causes, such as the illness or death of one or both parents, and even some of these catastrophies might have been averted, as, for example, deaths due to industrial accidents and dissipation, and illness from communicable disease. The other causes of dependence are desertion of parents, improper guardianship, destitution, illegitimacy and the intemperance of parents. The desertion of parents amounts to twenty-five per cent of the causes so far studied, and reflects a weak phase of family life. This unfortunate condition is by no means confined to the poor, for certain boarding schools patronized by the rich are said to have as large a percentage of children who are sent away from their homes because of marital troubles and separations, as occur among the class of dependent children. One means to lessen the amount of child dependency and misery would be to strengthen home life in America and exalt its sanctity.

The children proposed for commitment should also be studied and compared with other children, for if we are to care for the children of others, we must know what manner of children they are, before we can wisely decide on the best method of training them. Our studies in New York State indicate that only one-half of the dependent children we have examined and tested mentally are up to normal standard. More than twenty-five per cent are a year retarded, nine per cent two years retarded, eight per cent three years retarded, and seven per cent more than three years retarded. Most of this seven per cent group are feeble-minded, although they are found in an institution which intends to receive only normal children. This is a rather bad showing considering that we are speaking of one of the best groups of dependent children, for this paper does not deal at all with the large quota of delinquent and defective children. It would seem that the dependent child is not on the average a satisfactory child, and that it is desirable racially to have a better breed of children than he represents.

We pass now to a study of the effect upon the parent and his child of the acceptance of that child as a public or private charge. Supposing the parent has neglected his child and the public assumes its care, society seems thereby to side in with the parent and say: "Why, yes, you may neglect your child altogether. We will support


it. Spend all your money on yourself." Or even if the parent is required to pay a weekly stipend, it is not a wholesome thing to relieve him from moral responsibility for his child's upbringing. If, however, the parent is good but needy, the breaking up of the home, which has frequently been advised, is a serious matter, for the effort to keep a family together acts as a moral tonic on the parent, whereas nothing in the world will recompense a child for the loss of his mother's love. A few more clothes or a little more to eat will not requite him.

We must admit that some parents are intemperate, cross, unwise, neglectful and vicious. In these cases the removal of one group of children probably means that others will be born, and this shows that the removal of children from the home does not really solve the problem, but only aggravates it. As a temporary expedient the child is snatched as a brand from the burning, but radical social measures are needed to prevent such vicious homes.

Another type of home is poor and ignorant, but not vicious. Oftentimes social workers, born to higher social development, cannot understand these homes of retarded civilization which are found here and there, as for example the Jackson-Whites within thirty miles of New York City, and exclaim: "This is too bad, it must not continue." But one of the first things a eugenics investigator comes to realize is that in this nation which claims to be so advanced and civilized, there are nevertheless communities which are still in the age of barbarism. Their food, raiment, tools, moral ideas and general knowledge are those of barbarians. If this condition existed only in a few families, we might perhaps hold that these families should be broken up. But there are thousands of such families, mostly healthy, contented with their lot, doing little harm except petty thieving, who live out their lives in some mountain retreat or secluded valley, making baskets, living on cornmeal and pork, inured to cold and scanty clothing. It would seem to be a sounder policy to bring the school and the church, social centers and a better paying industry to these people, than to place them forcibly in an altogether different environment to which they are not yet adapted.

It will be no easy task to improve the race to the point where there will be few or no dependent children, but the elimination of the dependent child will be one of the best indices of superiority in our national stock and in our civilization. This country of ours is big enough and rich enough so that every family ought to find room enough to live, and be sure of steady employment at a living wage, so that the little home groups can be kept together, and the parents

can see the reward of their hard toil and faithfulness in the vigor and virtue of their children. A child, more than one dreams, forms his whole philosophy of life and the universe before he is six or seven years old. Who feels more trusting and confident of the Heavenly Father's love than the little child chanting his evening prayer at his mother's knee? His faith in God is built by analogy on his faith in this mother's love. Beneficent home life is a national institution which must be sacredly preserved. Society should take measures to prevent the grinding poverty and discords which wreck some homes, and thereby create a better parenthood and neighborhood life, so that the problem of the dependent child may be eliminated as far as possible. American civilization must be built on sound home life, on devotion of parents to their offspring, on respect of children for their parents, and finally on the protection of the home by philanthropic agencies and by the state itself.



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